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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the proceedings of a meeting which was convened to build a network of contact people to discuss current models of library-based literacy programs, and to focus on resolutions to be taken back to the states for the upcoming White House Conference in 1991. The almost 100 participants in the forum included state library staff members, adult education providers, state librarians, members of the U.S. Department of Education, and professionals from both the public and the academic library communities. This report begins by discussing the planning of the forum, the growing federal priority for literacy, and legislation recently passed by the U.S. Congress. Forum activities are then summarized, including issues identified through a survey of state library personnel prior to the conference which served as the basis for workshops; the opportunity to learn more about federal legislation provided by Congressman Donald Payne and Senator Paul Simon; a keynote address by Gary Strong, State Librarian of California; sessions with Title VI Program officers Barbara Humes and Carol Cameron; controversy raised by statements made by Joan Seamon, recently appointed Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Division of Adult Literacy, which relegated the library to the role of a support agency rather than an educational agency in itself; and a lively, interactive discussion of some of the important concerns raised during the forum which was facilitated by Debra Wilcox Johnson from the University of Wisconsin. Four recommendations deemed to be the most important by forum participants are then presented, and a summing up of continuing concerns for the library community concludes the report. (BBM)

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Shaping National Library Literacy Policy:

A Report from the Alexandria Forum

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Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

Report from the National Forum for State Libraries, "Strengthening the Literacy Network" (1st, Alexandria, Virginia, May 20-22, 1990). (Referred to as the Alexandria Forum.)

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Shaping National Library Literacy Policy: A Report From the Alexandria Forum

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"By the year 2000 every adult will posses the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. " This goal for a more literate America was adopted by President Bush and the nation's governors last summer at the Educational Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In order to address these and other important concerns, close to one hundred people came together this past May in Alexandria, VA for the first national literacy forum for State Libraries, "Strengthening the Literacy Network." Funded by an LSCA Title VI grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), three state library agencies, Massachusetts, Michigan and Rhode Island worked with a dedicated planning team from six states to plan and implement a dynamic conference. This forum, which will be discussed in greater detail later, generated important recommendations which will have an impact on efforts to prepare for the White House Conference and ultimately on shaping a national library policy for literacy.

A Growing Federal Priority for Literacy

Literacy, or the ability to read, write, compute and communicate orally, includes the possession of a set of skills by an indi-

vidual which will allow full participation in society. This ability, or the lack of it, is now emerging as the critical factor in the success or failure of many federal programs. Until recently, these programs were funded without taking into consideration how an overwhelming lack of basic skills on the part of a target population would affect the viability of a program. Once considered solely the purview of education, literacy is now a significant component in social legislation such as the Family Support Act of 1988. Family literacy is included in the proposed expansion of Head Start, the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) is part of an amendment to the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) and basic skills are now a provision in the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act.

Not since the early 70s and the Right to Read movement has the federal government made literacy a national priority. The difference some twenty years later, however, is a realization that dollars and rhetoric alone will not be enough to address what has become a critical issue threatening the very premise of a democratic society. For example, it has been suggested that there is a need to restructure the whole delivery system for adult basic education. In 1989, the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis published the Jumpstart report which was disseminated nationally to members of Congress and the adult literacy community. Among a group of important background papers was one which proposed the development of an adult literacy system to parallel that of K-12 and higher education. Such a system would be grounded in an understanding of the nature of adult learners. Built in would

be opportunities for adult education teachers and/or a cadre of well trained, well supervised volunteers to improve their skills and knowledge through staff development, inservice training and program assessment.

Federal Legislation for Literacy

Over the course of the past spring and summer, both houses of Congress passed two of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation affecting the literacy needs of this country. Senator Paul Simon's (D-Ill) bill, "The National Literacy Act," passed with an unprecedented vote of 99 to 0. The House version, "Literacy for all Americans," submitted by Congressman Augustus Hawkins (D-CA) was part of omnibus education legislation subsuming an earlier bill sponsored by Representative Sawyer of Ohio. Of the two bills, the Senate version includes more mention of libraries. It suggests that contracts be made with Reading is Fundamental to increase the distribution of inexpensive books for targeted special needs groups. Also included is a section on providing better access to children's books among parents with children five and under. This proposal would support library outreach with material for those in welfare offices, homeless shelters, public housing, migrant labor facilities and offices which administer food stamps. Although the omnibus House bill has no similar provisions, a strong opening statement affirms the important role of the library as part of the educational establishment. Numerous opportunities are evident throughout both pieces of legisla-

tion for cooperation and collaboration with educational agencies, community centers and service providers.

In order to reach a compromise on the differences in language, funding and priorities, both bills will move to a joint committee made up of members from the House Education and Labor and Senate Education, Arts and Humanities committees. Fortunately, the library community has strong support on both committees. It is entirely likely that by Fall, a compromise bill will have been designed which can be then voted into law.

Shortly after the passage of the Simon bill in the Senate, The Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) was reauthorized.

Both House and Senate recognized the value of library-based literacy programs by adding new provisions for literacy to the LSCA legislation. In addition, the house suggested increasing the Title VI appropriation budget to seven million dollars for 1991. Moreover, new language in Title I suggests using funds for the creation of "model library literacy centers." A new Title VIII, "Library Learning Center Programs," as yet unfunded, includes a section for "Family Learning Centers" and "Library Literacy Centers." With a suggested obligation of six million dollars, this Title will only be appropriated under certain funding conditions. However, the crafting of language in the legislation which allows for future funding is almost as important as the appearance of this new literacy title.

IMPACT ON LIBRARIES.

With important legislation close to passage and a clear message of support from the federal government, the library community cannot hold back from looking at opportunities for collaboration with adult education providers, community- based schools, learning centers and others who share a vision that the library is a place for all individuals to pursue the goal of lifelong learning.

Much has been said over the past ten years about the critical role which libraries need to assume in supporting a more literate society. This statement was never more true than today, nor is the library profession more in need of taking a long hard look at what each individual library is doing. Public, special, academic and institution libraries have a responsibility to promote literacy among all members of its community, users and non-users alike.

The State Library Literacy Forum

Participants at the state library literacy forum came from 48 distinct states and territories including Alaska, Hawaii and from Palau and the Mariana Islands in the South Pacific. The conference targeted state library staff members with the primary responsibility for developing literacy programs. However, a substantial number of adult education providers, state librarians, members of the U.S. Department of Education and profes-

sionals from both the public and academic library communities were included. The group met to build a network of contact people to discuss current models of library-based programs and to focus on resolutions to be taken back to their states for the upcoming White House Conference in 1991.

State agency personnel had been surveyed prior to the conference and requested a focus on the following issues:

* developing community collaborations at the state and local levels
* motivating constituent libraries to greater involvement with literacy programs
* technology-assisted learning
* family literacy
* workforce literacy
* rural literacy
* governance of Title VI

Workshops were given in each of these areas. In addition, two members of Congress provided an opportunity to learn more about current federal legislation. The Honorable Donald Payne Congressman from New Jersey is a relative newcomer in the House of Representatives. However, as a member of the select committee on education he both oversees LSCA funding and reviews the Simon/Hawkins bills. His presence at the conference provided an opportunity for him to meet with librarians and reaffirm his support for both literacy and library legislation. A former educator, he demonstrated his serious commitment to literacy by filing legislation to declare July 2, 1990 National Literacy Day.

Senator Paul Simon well known to members of the library communi-

ty for his commitment to libraries and to literacy spoke on his sponsorship of The National Literacy Act with its numerous provisions for library related activities.

An inspirational keynote address was given by Gary Strong, State Librarian of California, and one of the most committed supporters of literacy heading a state library agency. Emphasizing the importance of library involvement in this area, he also reminded participants that realistically, literacy must be made to fit within the state agency priorities. He promised to continue to work with the group on a series of recommendations in order to help them achieve acceptance by a wider audience.

Additional sessions included Title VI Program officers Barbara Humes and Carol Cameron who had an opportunity to discuss the concerns and issues around distribution and management of the federal program .

The conference was not without some controversy. Participants reacted strongly to statements made by Joan Seamon, former coordinator for the Illinois State Library's Literacy Office and recently appointed Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Division of Adult Literacy (DAEL) concerning the role of libraries in the literacy effort. Two schools of thought emerged in a reaction to Ms. Seamon's comments that the primary role of libraries was to collect and process adult new reader/literacy materials and to provide clients with referrals to other community programs. In her speech, she made reference to a literacy

meeting attended by four members of ALA. She stated that library representatives present were in agreement about the "supporting" role of libraries literacy. In a question and answer period following the speech, the interpretation of consensus about the limitations of library involvement in literacy was disputed by Sibyl Moses of ALA's Office of Library Outreach Services (OLOS). She disagreed with Ms. Seamon's assumptions about both the conclusions drawn from the meeting and the mission of the library. Ms. Seamon's statement that the library's primary role is not one of education, but rather of providing access to information evoked a strong reaction from many in the group. Many participants voiced their differences with Ms. Seamon's position expressing a belief that libraries consider education to be an essential part of their mission. In a statement circulated to all participants shortly after the conference, Ms. Moses explained that the American Library Association's official position on the role of libraries and literacy places no limitation on the involvement of libraries in literacy education. As quoted in the ALA Policy Manual, "The American Library Association supports the achievement of national literacy through educational activities utilizing the historical and cultural experience of libraries and librarians."

The discussion following this speech revealed that six years after the publication of A Nation at Risk, a document which virtually ignored libraries, we continue to be challenged in our efforts to communicate the place of the library as a center for

life long learning to "other" educational providers.

Interestingly enough, the strong reaction to the speaker's comment, helped to coalesce conference participants as a group. As a result, references were made in subsequent sessions to "the concept" of the library as an underpinning of the educational establishment. Controversy, as it turned out, became a vehicle for bringing people together around a larger issue.

Debra Wilcox Johnson, a professor and researcher with the University of Wisconsin, Madison utilized her substantial background in library-based literacy to facilitate a lively, interactive discussion. The group as a whole debated many of the important concerns which provided a focus for the final session. After two and one half days of small group, large group and individual exchanges, participants had developed a strong sense of community and purpose. They were able to reach consensus on those issues which should be priorities for White House Conference in 1991.

Conference participants determined the following recommendations to be the most important:

* incorporate into existing legislation the concept of the library as an educational agency.

* develop a strategy for more stable funding for literacy.

* continue to improve evaluation, research and dissemination of library-based literacy efforts by libraries and other literacy providers.

* redirect administrative responsibility for LSCA Titles related to literacy directly to the state library agency.

Although the recommendation regarding Title VI was adopted by the group, a substantial number of people expressed concerns about the implications of redirecting this title to individual states. For example, if Title VI funds were distributed on a formula basis, then the larger states would receive more money than smaller states. At present, the process is competitive and all libraries, both state and public, have an equal opportunity to receive funding based on the quality of their proposals. On the other hand, many state agencies would like to see a more equitable distribution of these monies within their states and are concerned that only those libraries with more sophisticated proposal writing skills will continue to receive grants year after year. Many of these issues were brought up in a valuable discussion session with Title VI program officers. As a result of a lively exchange of ideas, state libraries will be asked to read and comment on all Title VI proposals submitted from their state for fiscal year 1991. In all cases, comments will be restricted only to an applicant's compliance with the state's basic plan for library development. However, reviewing proposals will provide state agency staff with a better picture of which libraries are seeking Title VI funding.

The state library literacy forum provided an important first step in raising consciousness about a number of issues and con-

cerns which have both plagued and puzzled those with specific responsibility for literacy. It enabled many who had worked for years in isolation to touch base with those whom they had met only over the phone, corresponded with or read about. Evaluations were extremely favorable in spite of some logistical problems. As one participant summed it up,"...it surpassed my expectations which are usually set naively high. I came away with a greatly strengthened personal resolve to bind together our partners in a state literacy initiative.... I brought back so many wonderful ideas to use at the state level and to share with literacy providers in our public library network."

Shaping a national library literacy policy will require state library agencies to build an infrastructure for literacy at the state level which promotes the library as an accepted member of the educational community. With increased funding for literacy under LSCA many library programs will be required to demonstrate collaborations with other community providers. New programs will demand increased outreach to those who cannot avail themselves of our excellent programs and services because they lack the skills or perceive no value in library use. The federal government has recognized our traditional role as a pivotal element in strengthening literacy within the family. We must now respond by putting into practice those models based on evaluation and research which are proven to be most effective.

In conclusion, with an educational goal for a literate nation by the year 2000, it can be observed that it is ultimately at the

community level that solutions must be reached. The goal of universal literacy will continue to elude us unless we integrate our diverse issues into a collective strategy. The focus for discussion at the White House Conference must acknowledge the basic premise that if people have not accepted literacy as a value in their lives they will neither pursue nor seek to maintain it. Librarians must recognize that the library's support of the ongoing process of learning, often referred to as "the literacy continuum, " may need to far surpass the simple provision of low level reading materials and program referrals. Without continuous promotion of the library as a dynamic and vital center for learning, many community members will never know about or seek out our resources. All libraries must commit themselves to a more aggressive role to open up the world of books and information to a whole new group of library users, a role which promotes our historical mission to provide life long learning opportunities for every member of the community.